Is My Child Ready For Kindergarten?

When children turn five years old, many parents question whether or not their child is ready for kindergarten. There is a lot of advice floating about these days, and not all of it is helpful. Hard and fast rules such as "never send a summer birthday, five-year-old boy to kindergarten" are not appropriate.

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School readiness is more complex than sex and chronological age. It is also not simply being able to recite numbers, letters, shapes, and colors. School readiness is a constellation or combination of many factors. Few children are complete ready or not ready for kindergarten, and most will fall somewhere in between on a continuum of readiness.

Here are some developmental skills to look for in a school-ready child.

Social Development

A school-ready child:

- Is able to trust other adults and children
- Can play with, not just next to, other children
- Is able to learn and play in a group

Emotional Development

A school-ready child:

- Has some degree of independence and self-direction
- Has self-control or ability to delay gratification (even briefly)
- Is reasonably confident and willing to try new things
- Is interested in school and in learning new things

Language Development

A school-ready child:

- Is able to understand directions
- Is able to express needs
- Is able to communicate with adults and other children
- Can express thoughts in sentences
- Has a reasonably broad vocabulary

Motor Development

A school-ready child:

- Can run and jump (if not handicapped)
- Has a sense of spatial awareness and balance
- Shows right or left dominance
- Has self-help skills: dressing, eating, and toileting
- Is able to manipulate small objects
- Can copy simple symbols
- Can hold a pencil appropriately

Intellectual and Academic Development

A school-ready child:

• Is able to focus and concentrate on an activity for 10 to 15 minutes

• Understands that letters stand for something

• Understands that printed text is spoken language written down

• Has had experiences with various environments (grocery store, post office, library, department store, etc.)

• Can follow simple directions and remember simple routines

• Is able to stick with and solve simple problems

Researchers have identified elements of homes that prepare children for school. Indeed, the "academic culture" of the home appears more influential than either income level or parents' level of education.

Parents can prepare their children for school by communicating that school is important and by helping them develop the language skills and social behaviors needed for school.

It is important that parents feel and communicate that school is important and do their best to ensure their child's regular school attendance. Parents can model appropriate use of written materials, whether they be TV Guides, magazines, newspapers, or books. Using language often with children is important. This includes talking about events and feelings, in addition to giving directives. Finally, parent-child interaction which demonstrates social behaviors needed for school, such as complying with rules and expectations and delaying immediate gratification, is critical.

Obviously, it is important for parents to do their best to ensure that their children are healthy and consume reasonably nutritious foods in adequate amounts. Less obvious is the need for parents to monitor and control the amount and content of television watching in the household.

Children who watch excessive amounts of television are losing precious time that could otherwise be spent in more mentally and physically challenging activities.

Reading to children prepares them for school in a variety of ways.

Finally, parents who read to their children for as little as ten minutes daily at bedtime are giving their children a bouquet of important readiness activities. These include close body contact (which promotes security and independence), practice in learning and using language skills, vicarious learning about the world and its peoples, and maybe most important, the concept that reading is fun.

Additional factors may affect children's readiness for kindergarten, such as temperament and activity level. However, it is important to realize that not all kindergartens, whether publicly or privately sponsored, use developmentally appropriate teaching methods. Excessive dependence on worksheets and "seat work" which require children sit still, be quiet, and focus on abstract tasks for extended periods of time are NOT appropriate.

Children learn by doing, experiencing, and interacting with the people and objects in their environment. Therefore, the question is not simply "Is my child ready for kindergarten?" but "Is the kindergarten ready for my child?".

Questions About Kids is on the Web at:

http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed

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